



Role of Indian Women in the Protection of the Environment

Dr. Shaheema A S

Assistant Professor SDM Law College

Centre for Post Graduate Studies and Research in Law

Mangauru, Karnataka.

Abstract

Indian women have made their remarkable struggle and achieved success in the upliftment of the country. Accordingly, Indian women have played important roles in various sectors such as the freedom movement, girls' education, elimination of bad customs from the society, protection of the environment, and so on. She may be a tribal, rural, urban, old or young woman, her participation in the protection of the environment is worth discussing here. It was in the 18th century the Indian woman called Amrita Bai played a significant role and sacrificed her life for the protection of sacred trees called khejri. This was just the beginning several such Indian women were and are making various efforts for the protection of the environment. The answer to the question of gender equality in the matters of environmental protection could be found under Article 51 A(g) of the Indian Constitution which provides for the fundamental duty of the Indian citizens for the protection and improvement of the natural environment and the Indian women have done remarkable efforts in the fulfilling this fundamental duty along with Indian men. In this paper, the author has briefly discussed the role of several Indian women in the protection of the environment. Further, the national and international laws which provide for the participation of women in the protection of the environment have also been discussed.

Introduction

We human beings are part and parcel of the natural environment which has a wide meaning and includes trees, air, water, animals, birds, land, living and non-living creatures, microorganisms and property. But the beautiful natural environment is degrading because of various types of pollution caused by human beings. Protection of the environment is every human being's duty as provided under the fundamental duties of our Indian Constitution. Every woman is a role model in the protection of the environment. In her day-to-day life, she directly or indirectly involves herself in the protection of the environment but few exceptional women have made the world realise that environment is important for human sustenance and protection of the same is our responsibility. Globally, the women such as Rachel Carson, Margaret Thomas Murie, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Wangari Mathai, Rosalie Edge, Jane Goodall, Sylvia Earle and many other women have made remarkable efforts in the protection of the environment. Similarly, Indian women have played a significant role in the protection of the environment in India and the same has been briefly discussed in this article.

India is at the bottom of the list of the Environment Performance Index (EPI), 2018 and it ranks 177 out of 180 countries relating to air quality in the environmental health category. This EPI data shows India's poor performance in the environmental health policy objective. Accordingly, India's EPI rank in 2020 was 27.6 out of 100 (168th rank in the 12th edition of the Biennial EPI 2020). This Ranking was measured by Yale University which takes a snapshot of 10 years of environmental performance at the intentional and national level considering 32 indicators of environmental performance. According to this index, India needs to improve sustainable development goals giving priority to some environmental issues such as air and water quality, climate change and biodiversity.

Importance of Environment

We may question ourselves, why do we need to protect the environment? what is the importance of protecting the environment? and so on. There are several reasons for answers to these questions. A healthy environment makes the healthy ecological process. Environmental pollution is causing various changes in the atmosphere. The air pollution, water pollution, climate change, land pollution, deforestation, noise pollution, nuclear pollution and various other types of pollution are leading to an ecological imbalance resulting in global warming, ozone depletion, melting of glaciers, forest fire, and diseases, etc. If we protect our environment from getting polluted, we can have a better livelihood such as safe shelter, healthy life, food security, clean air, clean water, natural medicines, good mental health, and a good future for our upcoming generations.

Women and International Environmental Protection Laws

Several international environmental protection laws refer to the participation of women in the conservation and protection of the environment. It was for the first time at the international level the UN

Dr. Shaheema A S



Stockholm Conference on Human Environment which was held in 1972 (referred to as Magna Carta on environment protection) made the explicit mention of "man" in its principle 1 which includes a woman. Further, this conference led to the 1992 Rio Declaration which recognised in its principle 20 the important role of women in environmental protection and sustainable development. Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration reads as "Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development".

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in its preamble recognise the important role played by women in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. The preamble of CBD reads as follows, "Recognizing also the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirming the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation".

UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in its article 5(d) makes the explicit reference to promoting awareness and enabling the participation of women to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought. Article 5(d) of UNCCD reads as follows, "Promote awareness and facilitate the participation of local populations, particularly women and youth, with the support of non-governmental organizations, in efforts to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought".

Rural women are the most vulnerable because they don't get any financial support for survival. If the State extends financial help, they will be able to do activities which help them become financially sound and do some work that directly or indirectly protects the environment. In this regard, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979 under Article 14 directs the State Parties to economically support rural women and have access to agricultural loans, credit, technology, marketing and agricultural land reforms or resettlement schemes. This provision helps the women to do agricultural activities which supports them to protect the environment directly or indirectly.

Besides, all the above major conventions there are several other conferences held on the empowerment of women, for example, the UN Women's Conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985 which stresses the significance of women's participation in environmental protection by adopting sustainable development methods. Further, the Fourth World Women's Conference in 1995 was held in Beijing which states the women's active participation in the environmental decisions making at every level and to involve women in policies and programmes for sustainable development. 25 years after Fourth World women's Conference, the Beijing +25 Declaration, 2020 provides States obligations to Strengthen efforts in customising a gender perception into climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies. It further states to give more importance to women's leadership in environmental decision making.

Women and National Environmental Protection Laws

India has enforced much legislation for the protection and conservation of the environment. The Environment Protection Act, 1986 was enacted in India based on the decision taken at the UN Conference Human Environment held in Stockholm, 1972 for the protection and improvement of the environment. Before the enactment of the Environment Protection Act, 1986 there were several other legislations enacted on specific environmental subjects like air, water, forests, wildlife, and so on. The Constitution of India has inserted provisions Article 48A and 51A(g) through amendments for the protection and conservation of the environment. Further, Article 21 guarantees through judicial decisions, the right to a healthy environment free from the danger of disease and infection. The National Forests Policy, 1988 and 1990's Joint Forests Programme provides for 33 Per cent compulsory membership of Women in the Vana Samrakshana Samitis.

Indian Women and the protection of the Environment

Since the 18th century, there are a series of environmental movements led by Indian women for the protection and conservation of the environment and sustenance for livelihood. Several Indian women from rural and urban backgrounds fought for the protection of trees, animals, clean water and air and a noise-free atmosphere. Amrita Bai, Bachni Devi, Gauri Devi, Indira Gandhi, Medha Patkar, Salumarada Thimmakka, and many other Indian women have dedicated their lives to the protection and conservation of the environment. The contributions of Indian women to the protection of the environment are discussed below:

Amrita Bai (Khejarli movement)

In 1731 Amrita Bai, a Bishnoi woman who lived in the scrub forests at Khejarli village, near Jodhpur, Rajasthan sacrificed her life for saving trees called Khejri in her village which her community



hold as sacred. Along with her 363 other Bishnoi women lost their lives. These women were marked in Indian history as the first women environmentalist.

Mrs Indira Gandhi (Protection and Conservation of the Environment)

The then Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi had a good concern for nature and she has been a good example of a women environmentalist in India. She was the only head of the Government to speak at the first UN International Conference on Human Environment held in Stockholm in June 1972. While delivering her speech at Stockholm Conference, she pointed out that population, poverty and pollution are the three main hindrances to the country's development. Her love for mountains, forests, wildlife, birds, trees, and stones and the worry about the environmental impact of urbanisation and industrialisation made her do several environmental protection and conservation activities in India. She revolutionised wildlife conservation in India through Project Tiger which is considered one of her finest achievements. She banned the hunting of wild animals. Besides, she took a staunch initiative to protect crocodiles by establishing the Indian Crocodile Conservation Project in 1975. Further, she took several initiatives for the protection of endangered species such as hanguls, lions, cranes, deers, flamingos, Bustards, etc. She has credit for enacting several environmental laws during her period such as the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, Forests Conservation Act, 1980, Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981. She stopped work at Tehri Dam and Hydroelectric project at Silent Valley showing ecological concern.

Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi (Chipko Movement)

1972 is the year marked in the history of modern India as the environmental movement began with the Chipko movement. This movement was to protect the dense forests from the hands of timber merchants which is situated in the Terai region of Uttarakhand in the Himalayan foothills. Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi were the two women who lead the protest against cutting the tree by hugging the trees. Other women also joined hands in saving the trees as those women were affected by the deforestation in their region. "Ecology is the permanent economy" is the slogan attached to the Chipko movement which was also led by Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sundarlal Bahuguna.

Saalumarada Thimmakka (Planting row of trees)

Saalumarada Thimmakka is a 107-year-old environmentalist born in Hulikal village in Magadi Taluk, Ramnagar District of Karnataka. She belongs to a poor family and in her early childhood, she worked as a quarry labourer. She married Bikkala Chikkayya who was also a labourer. After several years of their marriage when the couple could not give birth to any children, they decided to plant Banyan trees and grew them as their children. Thimmakka and her husband have a long journey in planting the banyan trees. Thimmakka has planted 8,000 trees in her life. Thimmakka has been honoured with several prestigious awards for her dedication to planting banyan trees such as the Padma Shri, Karnataka Rajyothsava award, National Citizen Award by the Government of India, etc.

Women of Salkani Village (Appiko Movement)

Appiko is another environment protection movement initiated by Panduranga Hegde in 1983 to save the western Ghats forests in Uttara Kannada District of Karnataka. A large number of men, women and children of Salkani village hugged the trees and this movement was against the plan of the government for the development of industries in the forest area. Women conducted several awareness programmes by performing folk dances, street plays, marches and dramas. The government was forced to stop the plan of industrial development policy because of this movement.

Medha Patkar (Narmada Bachao Andolan)

This movement was led by Medha Patkar along with Baba Amte to stop the construction of dams funded by the World Bank along the river of Narmada in India. The Narmada Bachao Andolan was spread across three States Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. The construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam and Narmada Sagar was likely to affect the habitat of the 250,000 farmers and tribals. She used the non-violence method and protested against the construction of dams which made the World Bank withdraw from the project in 1993.

Sugatha Kumari (Silent Valley Movement)

Silent Valley Movement was led by Malayalam poet and environmentalist Sugatha Kumari to protect the Silent Valley which is one of the biodiversity hotspots in the Southern end of the Western Ghats of Kerala. The Kerala government had decided to construct the hydroelectric project in the forests of Silent Valley. Because of the Silent Valley movement, the project was cancelled by the then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi in 1980 and later in 1984, it was declared a National Park.

Dr. Shaheema A S



Sunitha Narain (Environmentalist)

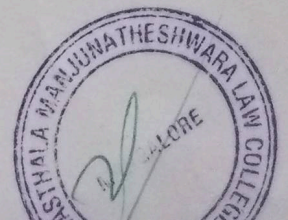
Sunita Narain is the writer, environmentalist and presently Director-General of the Centre and the Treasures of the Society for Environment Communication. Through literary work, she has shown concern for environmental protection. Her literary works include several environmental reports, sustainable development, rainwater harvesting, water management, green villages, pollution challenges, climate change, global warming, etc. She is associated with the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) since 1882 and got a credit for introducing Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) to reduce air pollution in Delhi. She was a member of the statutory body that made her set the Environment (Prevention and Control) Authority for Delhi, since then she has continued to monitor and reduce pollution in India. She was awarded Padma Shri by the Indian Government in 2005 and several other awards for literary contributions to the protection of the environment.

Conclusion

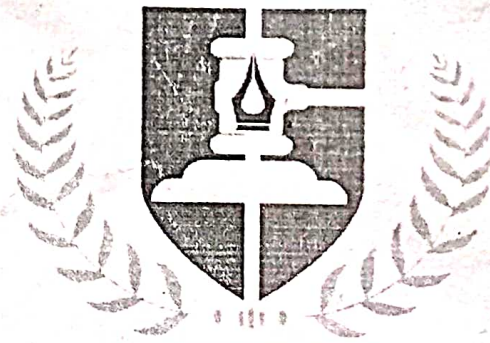
Hence, it could be noticed that Indian women have a greater role in the protection of the environment and achieving sustainable development goals. Indian women whether literate or illiterate have participated in every field and the protection of the environment is not an exception. Any damage to the environment will affect the women and they will be the more sufferers. Indian women must be given more opportunities to participate in the environmental decision-making process and such provisions need to be included in the major environmental protection legislation in India.

References

1. Claudia Ituarte Lima (2021, December 28). Women’s Rights in Environmental Law, from 1972 to Today. Retrieved from <https://chinadialogue.net> › climate › women’s-rights-in-e...
2. Convention on Biodiversity | United Nations. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org> › biological-diversity-day › conven...
3. Environmental movements: Chipko, Silent valley, Bishnois of Rajasthan. Retrieved from <https://gcwgandhinagar.com> ›
4. India ranks 177 out of 180 in Environmental Performance Index (2018, January 24) The Economic Times. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com>
5. Isha Gunwal, (2019) Role of Women in Environmental Conservation. SSRN Electronic Journal. Retrieved from <https://papers.ssrn.com> ›
6. Kanhiya Mahour, (2016) Role of Women in Environment Conservation. Journal of Advanced Research in Biology, 7(1) 17-26. Retrieved from <https://e-journal.sospublication.co.in>
7. Kiran Pandey (2020, June 7) India Must Redouble Sustainability Efforts: Environment Performance Index. Down to Earth. Retrieved From <https://www.downtoearth.org.in> › wildlife-biodiversity ›
8. Madhur (2019, March 17). Saalumarada Thimmakka – The Green Crusader. Retrieved from <https://www.karnataka.com>
9. Pandurang Hegde (1989, June). The Appiko Movement: Forest Conservation in Southern India Cultural Survival, Quarterly Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.culturalsurvival.org> › publications ›
10. Sandeep Kumar Aditya, (2016, April), Role of Women in Environmental Conservation. International Journal of Political Science and Development, 4(4), 140-145. Retrieved from <https://www.academicresearchjournals.org> ›
11. Sunita Narain - Centre for Science and Environment. Retrieved from <https://www.cseindia.org> › page › sunita-narain
12. Think Wildlife Foundation (2021, May 21) Indira Gandhi - The Forgotten Wildlife Conservationist Retrieved from <https://thinkwildlifefoundation.com> › indira-gandhi-the...
13. Udhriti Sarkar, (2020, January 17) Literature and Environment: The Importance of Ecofeminist Fiction in Environmental Protection. Retrieved from <https://feminisminindia.com> › Culture › Books
14. Vidya Venkat, (2017, May 21) Indira Gandhi, The Environmentalist, The Hindu. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com> › Books › Reviews
15. Women and Environmental Movements and Policies in India Retrieved from <http://epgp.inflibnet.ac.in>



279



LEGALPEDIA
JOURNAL[®]

ISSN No. 2581-7949

LEGALPEDIA JOURNAL[®]



VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1

www.legalpediajournal.com

